SEXISM IN ENGLISH: A 1990s UPDATE

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More than twenty years ago, Alleen Pace Nilsen, an English professor and assistant vice-president for academic affairs at Arizona State University, began a card catalog of sexist language. What began as a study of language grew into a commitment to social change. Nilsen concludes that sexism will not disappear from our language until it is erased from our minds.

Twenty years ago I embarked on a study of the sexism inherent in American English. I had just returned to Ann Arbor, Michigan, after living for two years (1967-69) in Kabul, Afghanistan, where I had begun to look critically at the role society assigned to women. The Afghan version of the chadori prescribed for Moslem women was particularly confining. Afghan jokes and folklore were blatantly sexist, such as this proverb: "If you see an old man, sit down and take a lesson; if you see an old woman, throw a stone."

But it wasn't only the native culture that made me question women's roles, it was also the American community.

Most of the American women were like myself—wives and mothers whose husbands were either career diplomats, employees of USAID, or college professors who had been recruited to work on various contract teams. We were suddenly bereft of our traditional roles: some of us became alcoholics, others got very good at bridge, while still others searched desperately for ways to contribute either to our families or to the Afghans. The local economy provided few jobs for women and certainly none for foreigners; we were isolated from former friends and the social goals we had grown up with.

When I returned in the fall of 1969 to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, I was surprised to find that many other women were also questioning the expectations they had grown up with. In the spring of 1970, a women's conference was announced. I hired a babysitter and attended, but I returned home more troubled than ever. The militancy of these women frightened me. Since I wasn't ready for a revolution, I decided I would have my own feminist movement. I would study the English language and see what it could tell me about sexism. I started reading a desk dictionary and making notecards on every entry that seemed to tell something about male and female. I soon had a dog-eared dictionary, along with a collection of notecards filling two shoe boxes.
Ironically, I started reading the dictionary because I wanted to avoid getting involved in social issues, but what happened was that my note-cards brought me right back to looking at society. Language and society are as intertwined as a chicken and an egg. The language a culture uses is telltale evidence of the values and beliefs of that culture. And because there is a lag in how fast a language changes—new words can easily be introduced, but it takes a long time for old words and usages to disappear—a careful look at English will reveal the attitudes that our ancestors held and that we as a culture are therefore predisposed to hold. My note-cards revealed three main points. Friends have offered the opinion that I didn’t need to read the dictionary to learn such obvious facts. Nevertheless, it was interesting to have linguistic evidence of sociological observations.

WOMEN ARE SEXY; MEN ARE SUCCESSFUL

First, in American culture a woman is valued for the attractiveness and sexiness of her body, while a man is valued for his physical strength and accomplishments. A woman is sexy. A man is successful.

A persuasive piece of evidence supporting this view are the eponyms—words that have come from someone’s name—found in English. I had a two-and-a-half-inch stack of cards taken from men’s names but less than a half-inch stack from women’s names, and most of those came from Greek mythology. In the words that came into American English since we separated from Britain, there are many eponyms based on the names of famous American men: Bartlett pear, boysenberry, diesel engine, Franklin stove, Ferris wheel, Gatling gun, mason jar, sideburns, sousaphone, Schick test, and Winchester rifle. The only common eponyms taken from American women’s names are Alice blue (after Alice Roosevelt Longworth), bloomers (after Amelia Jenks Bloomer), and Mae West jacket (after the burxom actress). Two out of the three feminine eponyms relate closely to a woman’s physical anatomy, while the masculine eponyms (except for sideburns after General Burnside) have nothing to do with the namesake’s body but, instead, honor the man for an accomplishment of some kind.

Although in Greek mythology women played a bigger role than they did in the biblical stories of the Judeo-Christian cultures and so the names of goddesses are accepted parts of the language in such place names as Pomona from the goddess of fruit and Athens from Athena and in such common words as cereal from Ceres, psychology from Psyche, and arachnoid from Arachne, the same tendency to think of women in relation to sexuality is seen in the eponyms aphrodisiac from Aphrodite, the Greek name for the goddess of love and beauty, and venereal disease from Venus, the Roman name for Aphrodite.

Another interesting word from Greek mythology is Amazon. According to Greek folk etymology, the ἀ means “without” as in atypical or amoral, while mazon comes from mazos meaning “breast” as still seen in mastectomy. In the Greek legend, Amazon women cut off their right breasts so that they could better shoot their bows. Apparently, the storytellers had a feeling that for women to play the active, “masculine” role, the Amazons adopted for themselves, they had to trade in part of their femininity.

This preoccupation with women’s breasts is not limited to ancient stories. As a volunteer for the University of Wisconsin’s Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE), I read a western trapper’s diary from the 1930s. I was to make notes of any unusual usages or language patterns. My most interesting finding was that the trapper referred to a range of mountains as The Teats, a metaphor based on the similarity between the shapes of the mountains and women’s breasts. Because today we use the French wording, The Grand Tetons, the metaphor isn’t as obvious, but I wrote to mapmakers and found the following listings: Nippletop and Little Nipple Top near Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks; Nipple Mountain in Archuleta County, Colorado; Nipple Peak in Coke County, Texas; Nipple Butte in Pennington, South Dakota; Squaw Peak in Placer County, California (and many other locations); Maiden’s Peak and Squaw Tit (they’re the same mountain) in the Cascade Range in Oregon; Mary’s Nipple near Salt Lake City, Utah; and Jane Russell Peaks near Stark, New Hampshire.

Except for the movie star Jane Russell, the women being referred to are anonymous—it’s only a sexual part of their body that is mentioned. When topographical features are named after men, it’s probably not going to be to draw attention to a sexual part of their bodies but instead to honor individuals for an accomplishment. For example, no one thinks of a part of the male body when hearing a reference to Pike’s Peak, Colorado, or Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Going back to what I learned from my dictionary cards, I was surprised to realize how many pairs of words we have in which the feminine word has acquired sexual connotations while the masculine word retains a serious businesslike aura. For example, a callboy is the person who calls actors when it is time for them to go on stage, but a callgirl is a prostitute. Compare sir and madam. Sir is a term of respect, while madam has acquired the specialized meaning of a brothel manager. Something similar has happened to master and mistress. Would you rather have a painting by an old master or an old mistress?

It’s because the word woman had sexual connotations, as in “She’s his woman,” that people began avoiding its use, hence such terminology as ladies’ room, lady of the house, and girls’ school or school for young ladies. Feminists, who ask that people use the term woman rather than girl or lady, are rejecting the idea that woman is primarily a sexual term.
They have been at least partially successful in that today woman is commonly used to communicate gender without intending implications about sexuality.

I found two hundred pairs of words with masculine and feminine forms, e.g., heir-heiress, hero-heroine, steward-stewardess, usher-usherette. In nearly all such pairs, the masculine word is considered the base, with some kind of a feminine suffix being added. The masculine form is the one from which compounds are made, e.g., from king-queen comes kingdom but not queendom, from sportsman-sportslady comes sportsmanship but not sportsladyship. There is one—and only one—semantic area in which the masculine word is not the base or more powerful word. This is in the area dealing with sex and marriage. When someone refers to a virgin, a listener will probably think of a female, unless the speaker specifies male or uses a masculine pronoun. The same is true for prostitute.

In relation to marriage, there is much linguistic evidence showing that weddings are more important to women than to men. A woman cherishes the wedding and is considered a bride for a whole year, but a man is referred to as a groom only on the day of the wedding. The word bride appears in bridal attendant, bridal gown, bridesmaid, bridal shower, and even bridgroom. Groom comes from the Middle English grom, meaning “man,” and in the sense is seldom used outside of the wedding. With most pairs of male/female words, people habitually put the masculine word first, Mr. and Mrs., his and hers, boys and girls, men and women, kings and queens, brothers and sisters, guys and dolls, and host and hostess, but it is the bride and groom who are talked about, not the groom and bride.

The importance of marriage to a woman is also shown by the fact that when a marriage ends in death, the woman gets the title of widow. A man gets the derived title of widower. This term is not used in other phrases or contexts, but widow is seen in widowhood, widow’s peak, and widow’s walk. A widow in a card game is an extra hand of cards, while in typesetting it is an extra line of type.

How changing cultural ideas bring changes to language is clearly visible in this semantic area. The feminist movement has caused the differences between the sexes to be downplayed, and since I did my dictionary study two decades ago, the word singles has largely replaced such sex specific and value-laden terms as bachelor, old maid, spinster, divorcee, widow, and widower. And in 1970 I wrote that when a man is called a professional he is thought to be a doctor or a lawyer, but when people hear a woman referred to as a professional they are likely to think of a prostitute. That’s not as true today because so many women have become doctors and lawyers that it’s no longer incongruous to think of women in those professional roles.

Another change that has taken place is in wedding announcements.

They used to be sent out from the bride’s parents and did not even give the name of the groom’s parents. Today, most couples choose to list either all or none of the parents’ names. Also it is now much more likely that both the bride and groom’s picture will be in the newspaper, while a decade ago only the bride’s picture was published on the “Women’s” or the “Society” page. Even the traditional wording of the wedding ceremony is being changed. Many officials now pronounce the couple “husband and wife” instead of the old “man and wife,” and they ask the bride if she promises “to love, honor, and cherish,” instead of “to love, honor, and obey.”

WOMEN ARE PASSIVE; MEN ARE ACTIVE

The wording of the wedding ceremony also relates to the second point that my cards showed, which is that women are expected to play a passive or weak role while men play an active or strong role. In the traditional ceremony, the official asks, “Who gives the bride away?” and the father answers, “I do.” Some fathers answer, “Her mother and I do,” but that doesn’t solve the problem inherent in the question. The idea that a bride is something to be handed over from one man to another bothers people because it goes back to the days when a man’s servants, his children, and his wife were all considered to be his property. They were known by his name because they belonged to him, and he was responsible for their actions and their debts.

The grammar used in talking or writing about weddings as well as other sexual relationships shows the expectation of men playing the active role. Men wed women while women become brides of men. A man possesses a woman, he deflowers her, he performs; he scores; he takes away her virginity. Although a woman can seduce a man, she cannot offer him her virginity. When talking about virginity, the only way to make the woman the actor in the sentence is to say that “She lost her virginity,” but people lose things by accident rather than by purposeful actions, and so she’s only the grammatical, not the real-life, actor.

The reason that women tried to bring the term Mrs. into the language to replace Miss and Mrs. relates to this point. Married women resent being identified only under their husband’s names. For example, when Susan Glascoc did something newsworthy, she would be identified in the newspaper only as Mrs. John Glascoc. The dictionary cards showed what appeared to be an attitude on the part of the editors that it was almost indecent to let a respectable woman’s name march unaccompanied across the pages of a dictionary. Women were listed with male names whether or not the male contributed to the woman’s reason for being in the dictionary or in his own right was as famous as the woman. For example, Charlotte Brontë was identified as Mrs. Arthur B. Nicholls, Amelia Ear-
thetically pleasing items, e.g., Ruby, Jewel, and Pearl. Esther and Stella mean "star," Ada means "ornament," and Vanessa means "butterfly." Boys are more likely to be given names with meanings of power and strength, e.g., Neil means "champion," Martin is from Mars, the God of War, Raymond means "wise protection," Harold means "chief of the army," Ira means "vigilant," Rex means "king," and Richard means "strong king."

We see similar differences in food metaphors. Food is a passive substance just sitting there waiting to be eaten. Many people have recognized this and so no longer feel comfortable describing women as "delectable morsels." However, when I was a teenager, it was considered a compliment to refer to a girl (we didn't call anyone a woman until she was middle-aged) as a cute tomato, a peach, a dish, a cookie, honey, sugar, or sweetie-pie. When being affectionate, women will occasionally call a man honey or sweetie, but in general, food metaphors are used much less often with men than with women. If a man is called a fruit, his masculinity is being questioned. But it's perfectly acceptable to use a food metaphor if the food is heavier and more substantive than that used for women. For example pin-up pictures of women have long been known as cheesecake, but when Burt Reynolds posed for a nude centerfold the picture was immediately dubbed beefcake, c.f., a hunk of meat. That such sexual references to men have come into the language is another reflection of how society is beginning to lessen the differences between their attitudes toward men and women.

Something similar to the fruit metaphor happens with references to plants. We insult a man by calling him a pansy, but it wasn't considered particularly insulting to talk about a girl being a wallflower, a clinging vine, or a shrinking violent, or to give girls such names as Ivy, Rose, Lily, Iris, Daisy, Camellia, Heather, and Flora. A plant metaphor can be used with a man if the plant is big and strong, for example, Andrew Jackson's nickname of Old Hickory. Also, the phrases blooming idiots and budding geniuses can be used with either sex, but notice how they are based on the most active thing a plant can do which is to bloom or bud.

Animal metaphors also illustrate the different expectations for males and females. Men are referred to as studs, bucks, and wolves while women are referred to with such metaphors as kiteen, bunny, beaver, bird, chick, and lamb. In the 1950s we said that boys went tomcatting, but today it's just catting around and both boys and girls do it. When the term foxy, meaning that someone was sexy, first became popular it was used only for girls, but now someone of either sex can be described as a fox. Some animal metaphors that are used predominantly with men have negative connotations based on the size and/or strength of the animals, e.g., beast, bullheaded, jackass, rat, loanshark, and vulture. Negative metaphors used with women are based on smaller animals, e.g., social
butterfly, mousey, catty, and vixen. The feminine terms connote action, but not the same kind of large scale action as with the masculine terms.

WOMEN ARE CONNECTED WITH NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS; MEN WITH POSITIVE CONNOTATIONS

The final point that my notecards illustrated was how many positive connotations are associated with the concept of masculine, while there are either trivial or negative connotations connected with the corresponding feminine concept. An example from the animal metaphors makes a good illustration. The word shrew taken from the name of a small but especially vicious animal was defined in my dictionary as "an ill-tempered scolding woman," but the word shrewd taken from the same root was defined as "marked by clever, discerning awareness" and was illustrated with the phrase "a shrewd businessman."

Early in life, children are conditioned to the superiority of the masculine role. As child psychologists point out, little girls have much more freedom to experiment with sex roles than do little boys. If a little girl acts like a tomboy, most parents have mixed feelings, being at least partially proud. But if their little boy acts like a sissy (derived from sister), they call a psychologist. It's perfectly acceptable for a little girl to sleep in the crib that was purchased for her brother, to wear his hand-me-down jeans and shirts, and to ride the bicycle that he has outgrown. But few parents would put a boy baby in a white and gold crib decorated with frills and lace, and virtually no parents would have their little boys wear his sister's hand-me-down dresses, nor would they have their son ride a girl's pink bicycle with a flower-decked basket. The proper names given to girls and boys show this same attitude. Girls can have "boy" names—Cris, Craig, Jo, Kelly, Shawn, Teri, Toni, and Sam—but it doesn't work the other way around. A couple of generations ago, Beverley, Frances, Hazel, Marion, and Shirley were common boys' names. As parents gave these names to more and more girls, they fell into disuse for males, and some older men who have these names prefer to go by their initials or by such abbreviated forms as Haze or Shirl.

When a little girl is told to be a lady, she is being told to sit with her knees together and to be quiet and dainty. But when a little boy is told to be a man he is being told to be noble, strong, and virtuous—to have all the qualities that the speaker looks on as desirable. The concept of manliness has such positive connotations that it is used to be a compliment to call someone a he-man, to say that he was doubly a man. Today many people are more ambivalent about this term and respond to it much as they do to the word macho. But calling someone a manly man or a virile man is nearly always meant as a compliment. Virile comes from the Indo-European vir meaning "man," which is also the basis of virtuous. Contrast the positive connotations of both virile and virtuous with the negative connotations of hysterical. The Greeks took this latter word from their name for uterus (as still seen in hysterectomy). They thought that women were the only ones who experienced uncontrolled emotional outbursts, and so the condition must have something to do with a part of the body that only women have.

Differences in the connotations between positive male and negative female connotations can be seen in several pairs of words that differ denotatively only in the matter of sex. Bachelor as compared to spinster or old maid has such positive connotations that women try to adopt them by using the term bachelor-girl or bachelorette. Old maid is so negative that it's the basis for metaphors: pretentious and fussy old men are called old maids, as are the leftover kernels of unpopped popcorn, and the last card in a popular children's game.

Patron and matron (Middle English for father and mother) have such different levels of prestige that women try to borrow the more positive masculine connotations with the word patroness, literally "female father." Such a peculiar term came about because of the high prestige attached to patron in such phrases as a patron of the arts or a patron saint. ~ Matron is more apt to be used in talking about a woman in charge of a jail or a public restroom.

When men are doing jobs that women often do, we apparently try to pay the men extra by giving them fancy titles, for example, a male cook is more likely to be called a chef while a male seamstress will get the title of tailor. The armed forces have a special problem in that they recruit under such slogans as "The Marine Corps builds men!" and "Join the Army! Become a Man." Once the recruits are enlisted, they find themselves doing much of the work that has been traditionally thought of as "women's work." The solution to getting the work done and not insulting anyone's masculinity was to change the titles as shown below:

- waitress
- orderly
- nurse
- medic or corpsman
- secretary
- clerk-typist
- assistant
- adjutant
- dishwasher or KP (kitchen police)
- kitchen helper

Compare brave and squaw. Early settlers in America truly admired Indian men and hence named them with a word that carried connotations of youth, vigor, and courage. But they used the Algonquin's name for "woman" and over the years it developed almost opposite connotations to those of brave. Wizard and witch contrast almost as much. The masculine wizard implies skill and wisdom combined with magic, while the feminine witch implies evil intentions combined with magic. Part of the unattractiveness of both witch and squaw is that they have been used so often
to refer to old women, something with which our culture is particularly uncomfortable, just as the Afghans were. Imagine my surprise when I ran across the phrases _grandfatherly advice_ and _old wives' tales_ and realized that the underlying implication is the same as the Afghan proverb about old men being worth listening to while old women talk only foolishness.

Other terms that show how negative we view old women as compared to young women are _old nag_ as compared to _filly_, _old crow_ or _old bat_ as compared to _bird_, and of being _catty_ as compared to being _kittenish_. There is no matching set of metaphors for men. The chicken metaphor tells the whole story of a woman's life. In her youth she is a _chick_. Then she marries and begins _feathering her nest_. Soon she begins feeling _cooped up_, so she goes to _hen parties_ where she _cackles_ with her friends. Then she has her _brood_, begins to _henpeck_ her husband, and finally turns into an _old biddy_.

I embarked on my study of the dictionary not with the intention of prescribing language change but simply to see what the language would tell me about sexism. Nevertheless I have been both surprised and pleased as I've watched the changes that have occurred over the past two decades. I'm one of those linguists who believes that new language customs will cause a new generation of speakers to grow up with different expectations. This is why I'm happy about people's efforts to use inclusive language, to say _he or she_ or _they_ when speaking about individuals whose names they do not know. I'm glad that leading publishers have developed guidelines to help writers use language that is fair to both sexes, and I'm glad that most newspapers and magazines list women by their own names instead of only by their husbands' names and that educated and thoughtful people no longer begin their business letters with "Dear Sir" or "Gentlemen," but instead use a memo form or begin with such salutations as "Dear Colleagues," "Dear Reader," or "Dear Committee Members." I'm also glad that such words as _poetess_, _authoress_, _conductor_, and _aviatrix_ now sound quaint and old-fashioned and that _chairman_ is giving way to _chair_ or _head_, _mailman_ to _mail carrier_, _clergyman_ to _clergy_, and _stewardess_ to _flight attendant_. I was also pleased when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration bowed to feminist complaints and in the late 1970s began to alternate men's and women's names for hurricanes. However, I wasn't so pleased to discover that the change did not immediately erase sexist thoughts from everyone's mind, as shown by a headline about Hurricane David in a 1979 New York tabloid, "David Rapes Virgin Islands." More recently a similar metaphor appeared in a headline in the _Arizona Republic_ about Hurricane Charlie, "Charlie Quits Carolinas, Flirts with Virginia."

What these incidents show is that sexism is not something existing independently in American English or in the particular dictionary that I happened to read. Rather, it exists in people's minds. Language is like an X-ray in providing visible evidence of invisible thoughts. The best thing about people being interested in and discussing sexist language is that as they make conscious decisions about what pronouns they will use, what jokes they will tell or laugh at, how they will write their names, or how they will begin their letters, they are forced to think about the underlying issue of sexism. This is good because as a problem that begins in people's assumptions and expectations, it's a problem that will be solved only when a great many people have given it a great deal of thought.